

forever marred by the plague of gun violence.

COVID-19 is not the only epidemic claiming innocent lives in America. Last year alone, 20,000 Americans were killed by gun violence, the highest number in almost two decades. Most of these incidents never reached the headlines, but we cannot allow ourselves to become numb to their devastation. After one of the most difficult years in American history, we all want our lives and our country to return to normal. But not this normal—oh, no, not the normal that accepts everyday gun violence as a matter of course, an incidental risk to living in these United States of America. We cannot, we must not accept that as normal. We must not shrink from our moral obligation to act.

Two years ago, the Republican leader, then in the majority, promised that this Chamber would have a real debate on gun violence in this country. It never happened. Even the former President made some noises about supporting commonsense gun safety measures before quickly retreating, the result, once again, of bitter, reflexive opposition by the NRA to any progress and fear among so many Republicans of what the NRA might do to them if they spoke truth to power.

Well, now we don't have a Republican majority. We have a Democratic one. This time is going to be different. A Democratic majority in the Senate is going to act. I have committed to put legislation to expand background checks on the floor of the Senate. We will debate it. We will vote on it.

Just yesterday, my colleague Senator DURBIN led the Judiciary Committee in hearing from scores of witnesses about proposals to reduce gun violence that the Senate might take up.

I have started the process to make legislation to combat hate crimes against Asian Americans, led by Senators HIRONO and Representative MENG in the House, available for action on the floor.

I have been told by so many Asians in New York that they are afraid just to walk down the street, something they used to do easily. I have seen the pain and fear in their faces as I have attended the rallies in New York.

Make no mistake, under the Democratic majority the Senate will debate and address the epidemic of gun violence in this country.

NOMINATION OF RACHEL LELAND LEVINE

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now on the Levine nomination, today, the Senate will confirm the nomination of Rachel Levine, Pennsylvania's top health official, to be the next Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services.

The Biden administration has brought many historic firsts into its ranks, including the first openly gay

Cabinet Secretary of any Agency. The confirmation of Rachel Levine represents another important milestone for the American LGBTQ community. She will be the first openly transgender official ever confirmed by the U.S. Senate. The arc of history is long, but it keeps bending in the direction of justice.

As transgender Americans suffer higher rates of abuse, homelessness, and depression than almost every other group, it is important to have national figures like Dr. Levine, who, by virtue of being in the public spotlight, will help break down barriers of ignorance and fear.

Pennsylvania's political leaders say Dr. Levine has forced people in their State to better understand the transgender community. One State legislator said:

She has robbed people of the false premise that they don't know any trans people and therefore don't need to be respectful of trans people.

The historic nature of her nomination should not be lost on anyone, but Dr. Levine thoroughly deserves to be confirmed on the strength of her qualifications.

Despite several attacks on her gender identity over the past year, Dr. Levine has stayed laser-focused on helping the State of Pennsylvania manage and respond to COVID. The quality of her public service is reflected in the fact that she was confirmed not once, not twice, but three times by the Republican-led State senate to serve first as physician general and then as health secretary.

The U.S. Senate should follow suit today and make Dr. Levine the Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services.

FOR THE PEOPLE ACT OF 2021

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, on one more issue, I was just over at the Rules Committee hearing. It is the first hearing I attended as majority leader because it was about S. 1, so important. And there, I showed—I showed my anger and frustration at what Republican legislatures are attempting to do throughout the country, take away people's right to vote, particularly people of color.

You know, it has been more than 160 years since the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments abolished slavery, but Jim Crow is still with us. When a State says you need a notary public to cast an absentee ballot, it is no different than asking African Americans to guess the number of jellybeans in the jar before they vote. It is certainly no different in intent to deprive them of their right, their constitutional right to vote.

And here we have Republican Senators making excuses for these vicious and often bigoted deprivations of the right to vote. They say that this is a State issue. No, Congress has passed numerous laws dealing with Federal

voting rights, and, in fact, the Constitution explicitly says that the Congress has the ability and right to do it. And yet Republicans who lost the election, instead of doing what we should be doing in a democracy—when you lose, you are supposed to figure out why you lost and win over the voters you didn't, but they would just deprive the voters who voted against them of the right to vote. That is eerily reminiscent of what dictators like Erdogan in Turkey or Orban in Hungary would do.

Our Republican Party has sunk so low that they have a Republican leader who is over in the Rules Committee defending these actions by State legislatures.

I asked him and all the Republicans to give us a reason. Why did the Georgia Legislature only pick Sundays to say there should be no early voting on Sunday? We know why. It is because that is the day African Americans vote in the "souls to the polls" operation, where they go from church to vote. It is despicable.

Every time you think the country has moved a long way, you see steps taken backward. Let's make no mistake about it, the shadow of Donald Trump—his big lie, his incessant focus on doing anything that benefits him, no matter if it is the truth or not, if it is constitutional or not, if it is racist or not—has now fallen over this party, and they are not even standing up to protect the sacred right to vote.

Shame, shame, shame on all of them. Shame. How can you defend these actions throughout legislatures, which the Washington Post said would amount to tens of millions of people losing their right to vote?

Are we a democracy? Are we? The shadow of Donald Trump falls dark and large over this caucus when they act like that, and it happens far too often. We will not let this stand. We will not let this stand. S. 1 will pass this body.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the